The Impact of Libraries in Small Island States: Media and Information Literacy, Sustainability and Building Partnerships Towards a 21st Century Information Society.

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Introduction

As a small-scale island society, an independent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands since 1986, Aruba is a relatively young nation, and a relatively new democracy.

With an education system inherited from the colonial days, where the spoken language (Papiamento), the primary official and spoken language, differs from the formal instruction language (Dutch). Papiamento/u is a language shared by the Southern Caribbean Islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao, spoken on all three islands, although with lexical and slight pronunciation differences between the islands. Culturally, Aruba has been on the crossroads of Arowac native inhabitation, Spanish and Dutch colonial influence, Afro-Caribbean slave trade, Latin-American and Anglo-Caribbean migrant workers, and American tourism and popular culture. Aruba is a diverse melting pot of cultures, a unique microcosmos of modern multiculturalism and multilingualism. But although culturally diverse, Aruba is economically a monoculture: after decades of economic prosperity through the oil industry (due to the close proximity to the Venezuelan mainland and its oil fields), our economy is almost fully dependent on the tourist industry. All in all, a small island developing state (SIDS), with ties to the world, but also quite dependent on a small set of external factors like tourism and regional security.

In the process of becoming a more diversified economy and a modern information society, Aruba is looking towards a future of becoming a more "sustainable" nation, connected to the world, where traditional disadvantages of islands, like scale, geography and (relative) isolation, matter less than before, and might even become strengths. For a modern 21st century economy and 21st century jobs, a 21st century skillset—and perhaps more importantly a 21st century mindset—is needed. This mindset needs to be one of flexibility, of lifelong learning and the ability to adapt to situations, work and jobs that might not exist yet.

How does our institution, a national library, fit into this? In a small society, small institutions like libraries can take on larger roles than just being a building containing books. They are—or can become—hubs in society, taking on a connecting role, an advocacy role for certain issues, like sustainability, access to information, and transparency, all of utmost importance to a nation.

Adding value: libraries sustaining communities, and vice versa

As a government institution Biblioteca Nacional Aruba is tasked with among other things:

   a. Providing (access to) knowledge and information;
   b. providing opportunities for development and education;
   c. promoting literacy/reading and getting acquainted with literature;

All which contribute to the personal development and improvement of the social opportunities of the general public.

These tasks sound like the common tasks of a library, and a library might go about by providing the same services and activities as it has for ages, geared towards books, reading, literacy and literature. But the question is: is that enough in this day and age? Can libraries survive and thrive by focusing on its core, or do they need to expand their soles, or is it just a question of libraries better advocating their role and their relevancy?

Parts of the following story might seem very recognizable, or even familiar. That's because many libraries and librarians think alike, inform themselves, and stay up-to-date with the latest developments. Ideas that work are transplanted into local libraries all over the world and being implemented as additions to strong library outreach programmes. That's the strength of ideas and information: good ideas travel fast.

Literacy rates on Aruba are relatively high compared to the region (over 97% of the total population), but traditional readership and library membership is down, as can be witnessed in many libraries across the world. Information across the world is accessible from nearly every home and through every mobile device on the island. People don't need to go to the library anymore to access certain pieces of information. But does that mean that we, as the Aruban National Library, are an obsolete institution?

Our answer is, in short, no. On the contrary: it's about the added value: The library is still very busy and well-visited, especially after school hours. Our workshops, book presentations and cultural events continue to attract diverse crowds. And if we can provide even higher levels of access to information, by either offering (internet) access, digital literacy programs, or by digitizing and publishing the wealth of information stored in our National and special collections, it will get even better.

A library is more than a building, more than a set of walls: it is a hub, a community center, an information gateway, more than the sum of its services. And there's where the library's role in the society lies: information, connections, enabling, and partnerships.

Access to information, in our eyes, goes way beyond proving the basic access itself. As information professionals, and knowledgeable members of society, librarians and by extension libraries can aspire to take an active role in shaping a knowledge-based information society, with learners of all ages in possession of media and information literacy skills, computational thinking skills, and critical thinking skills. With Aruba (as goes for most Caribbean nations) being a small (island) nation, literally one library (or one librarian) can make a difference.

In order to try and accomplish this larger role, at one point we recognized that we, as not just a national and a public library, but also as a government department, a heritage institutional *and* as a knowledge and information gateway, can leverage our unique position to go beyond our traditional role. Through partnerships libraries can help to stimulate our community, our society, our education system, reach its goals, reach a higher level, attain those 21st century skill- and mindsets.

Bridging a different kind of digital divide

In many parts of the world there exists a "digital divide" between the people who have access to technology and the internet, and those who have not. Although Aruba is a relatively prosperous island for Caribbean standards, this situation, to some extent, also exists on Aruba, as is the case in even the most affluent societies. That's why Biblioteca Nacional Aruba offers its patrons free access to Wi-Fi, and access to internet-connected computers, and increased access to its own digitized collections of newspapers, documentation and audiovisual materials. This is a crucial part of our vision to act as a gateway to any and all patrons and visitors in search of information, in whichever way, shape or form—or format.

But in a sense, with mobile technology becoming cheaper and more advanced, and thus more accessible, eliminating part of the digital divide for some, by providing access, in fact creates a different kind of "digital divide" at the same time: that of digital literacy, between the ones that can independently access, interpret, and transform, and use information and those that (yet) cannot: having an advanced, "smart" device in many cases does not yet equal effective use, and elimination of barriers to information access. And in a sense, that's also part of our core business as a library. For the younger generations, having grown up with ever-changing technological possibilities means that they can adapt to any new technology and adopt it quite effortlessly. But although technically advanced, are these younger generations media literate or information literate enough to navigate the possible dangers of a fully connected world, or consume, use and transform information in an effective, ethical and responsible way?

Conversely, for certain other groups of patrons—for instance senior citizens or job seekers trying to apply for jobs that require entirely different skillsets—other challenges and possible barriers exist.

The library, with its skilled and tech-savvy information professionals, can and should step in to help cross this divide. And in the situations where it can not step in directly, partnerships and influencing might be the way to go.

Partnerships for digital literacy and 21st century skills

For decades, the Aruba National Library has been involved in educational programs and in supporting schools. BNA has a school library service department geared towards primary education. The department supports schools in setting up school libraries as well as providing rotating topical collections to support the curriculum and to stimulate reading programs in schools. Apart from that the library has a strong after school activity program towards reading and literacy. In 2017, for instance, we celebrate the 25th edition of our annual children's book festival, a yearly week-long celebration of reading and children's literature, always with a multinational cast of authors.

Over the years, BNA, like many libraries, has been offering workshops and courses as well. Basic computer courses, digital photography courses, creative writing workshops, all efforts mostly geared towards senior citizens and "lifelong" (adult) learners. But with information not being solely available in books or in (physical) libraries anymore, and increasingly being available to anyone carrying a mobile device it is time to connect two traditional mainstays of libraries and carry it over to the modern day: information access and (information) literacy, combined with increasing access to modern technology at a younger age, brings with it a necessity to focus on the ability to effectively access, understand and being able to use information in a responsible way. These are crucial concepts of Media and Information Literacy (MIL), which as UNESCO (2013, see figure 1) denotes, center around information, media, internet, and *libraries*.
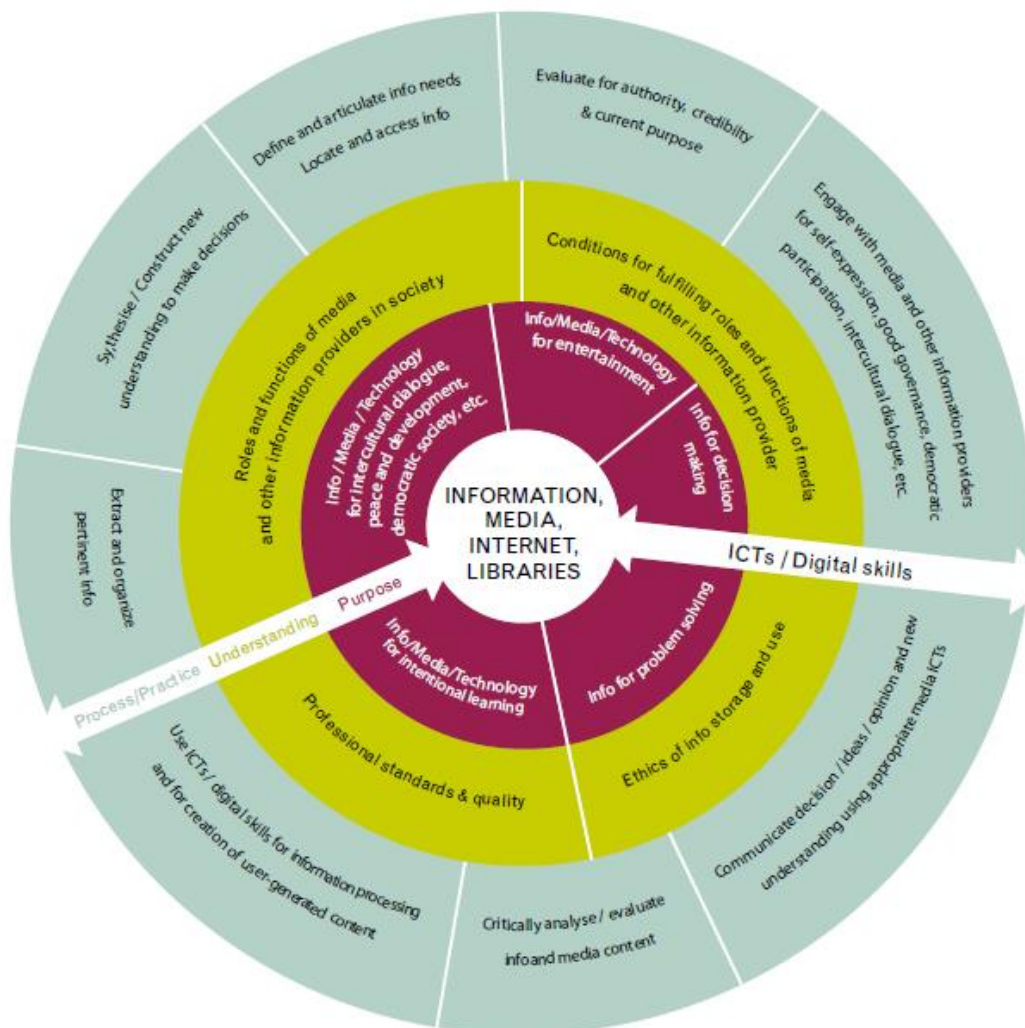
Figure 1: UNESCO's proposed conceptual model for Media and Information Literacy, with libraries at the center. Picture: Grizzle et al, *UNESCO Media and Information Literacy. Policy and Strategy guidelines* (2013).

As a library, you can either choose passive involvement in (digital) information access, by providing the infrastructure, computers and basic internet services, or set the bar a lot higher: by actively advocating open access to information, promoting information literacy, by organizing events, and by establishing partnerships to further these goals.

Being part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Aruba and its formal education system have traditionally been mostly influenced by the Dutch education system, and even to this day, by education "innovations" or reforms originating from the Netherlands. For the so-called 21st century skills, it is the same. Figures 2 and 3 show the Dutch conceptual model of 21st century skills ("Model 21e eeuwse vaardigheden", by SLO and Kennisnet) that is currently finding its way into the curriculum of Dutch schools. In the bottom right part of the model, four of the eleven skills form the "digital literacy" cluster. Closely related to the concept of media and information literacy (treated here as two separate skills, as opposed to UNESCO's model, which considers them as inseparable, as one) are the other digital literacy skills, basic ICT skills (which have been covered both in the schools' formal curricula and in libraries' course offerings for quite some time) and "computational thinking" or programming/coding skills.
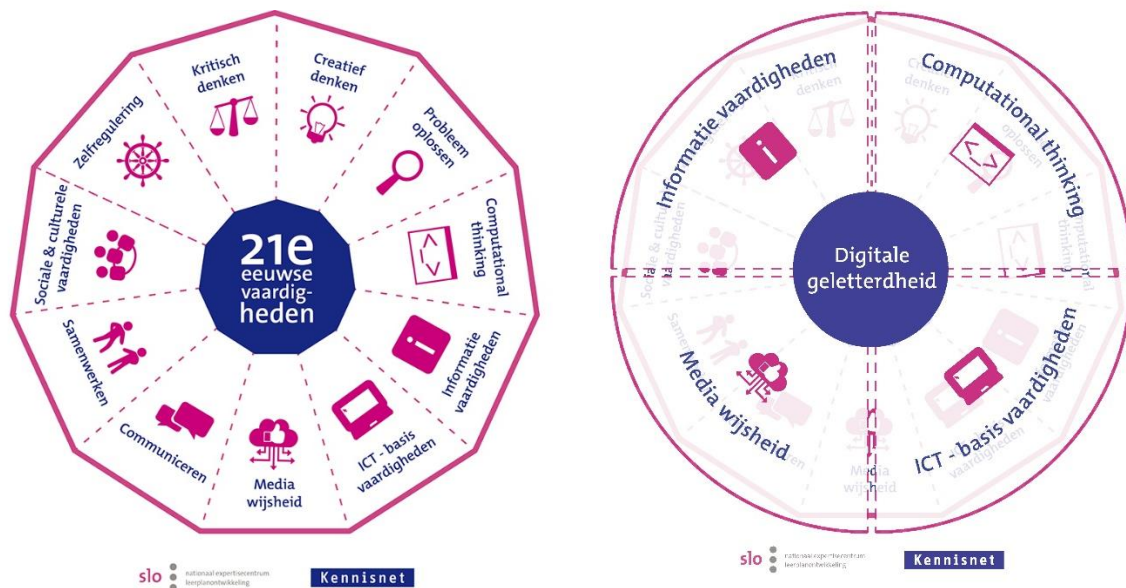
Figure 2 and 3: The Dutch Model for 21st century skills, with four of eleven skills focusing on elements of digital literacy. Pictures: SLO & Kennisnet, "Model 21e eeuwse vaardigheden", *Curriculum van de Toekomst* (2014). URL: http://curriculumvandetoekomst.slo.nl/21e-eeuwse-vaardigheden.

Many libraries focus on these coding and related skills, like robotics, 3d modelling and –printing, by establishing makerspaces and media labs in their libraries. The Aruban National Library has not reached that milestone yet, both is closely working with local partners like the Ministry of General Affairs' Chief Innovation Officer and her team to think of ways to convert the current ICT lab to a Media Lab/Makerspace, and have started talks to see whether the library's "bibliobuses" can take on a dual role, containing both books and a mobile "tech lab" and bringing these services to schools and community centers in neighborhoods. This is a good example where partnerships with innovative external parties can both diversify the range of services the library in-house and at the same time extend the library's reach by forging closer bonds with schools and neighborhoods, outside of the library's (physical) walls.

Another prime example of this quest to further advocate digital literacy is the establishment of Aruban participation in the annual global Hour of Code event. The Hour of Code (HoC) is an event which takes place every year in December. It is a one-hour introduction to computer science, where children and lifelong learners ages 4 and up can learn how to code in a game-based environment, learning logic, cooperating with each other, and other problem-solving skills all while seemingly "playing an online game". In December of 2015, BNA had the honor of hosting the first set of Hour of Code events on Aruba, in cooperation with local telecommunications and ICT companies, and with one primary school participating. That year a total of 150 school children aged 8-12 participated on Aruba, all in our library's computer lab. In December of 2016, Aruba's participation and the partnership had grown, with the library hosting over 300 students, double the number of the previous year, and over 1600 students participating nationwide. For a small island, this is not a small feat. For this year, we're aiming for at least the same levels of participation, broadening our "HoC coalition" to include even more private and public partners, all while using this event as an example of advocating its permanent inclusion in the national curriculum, as part of the above-mentioned set of interconnected 21st century skills.

On the other core digital literacy skills where libraries are crucial, namely Media and Information Literacy, we're also working hard in terms of both (co-)organizing events and advocating its importance in our current society: On the first of October 2014, BNA organized its first "Tablet Café" for senior citizens, offering bi-monthly meetups and assistance for people aged 60 and over for all technology- and connectivity-related questions. In July 2015, we became the first Aruban partner—and one of the first Dutch Caribbean partners—of *Mediawijzer.net*, the Dutch advocacy network for media literacy, co-founded by KB, the Dutch National Library, and its educational and media and broadcasting partners (like the aforementioned Kennisnet, and the Dutch Institute for Sound and Vision).

In February of 2016 Biblioteca Nacional Aruba (BNA) requested UNESCO funding to fortify its efforts in promoting the importance of 21st century and digital literacy skills in the modern information age, through UNESCO's bi-annual International Participation Programme. UNESCO's core values of its Communication and Information (CI) pillar[1] are: access to knowledge, freedom of expression (and information), media development and capacity building (the latter focusing on Media and Information Literacy). Looking at these core values, a close connection to a library's work and UNESCO's efforts, both internationally and nationally/locally, seems obvious.

Thanks to UNESCO's participation programme, we have been able to visit the other countries in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Curacao and St. Martin in May of 2017, and the Netherlands in November of 2017) to establish linkages and learn from fine examples elsewhere, and have been fortunate to be able to invite one of the (co-)founders of the Dutch *Mediawijzer*-network, the Dutch National Library's youth/literacy coordinator, Mrs. Norma Verheijen, to visit our island in February of 2018 and help us (as a library and as a country) establish a coalition that can serve as an advocacy platform, just as KB and *Mediawijzer* have done in the Netherlands over the past 13 years. As a result of all of this, in the month of November Aruba will have its first *Week van de Mediawijsheid* (Media Literacy Week), co-organized by BNA and IPA, Aruba's teacher training college.

At the conclusion of BNA's participation in the UNESCO participation programme, further linkages between UNESCO and our library have been established: starting March 2018, BNA is represented in the Aruban National Commission for UNESCO, for the second time in its history since becoming an associated member country in 1987. The library's representative is responsible for the CI (Communication and Information) pillar, which shares so may goals with that of the library world, as referenced earlier.

Sustainability, Durable Preservation, Digitization, and Open Access

BNA, as a government organization, is actively participating in the country's process of implementing the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and many initiatives related to sustainability and sustainable development as part of a new National Integrated Strategic Plan (NISP) based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its indicators. By using these universal/global indicators, Aruba will be able to monitor its progress by objective international standards, and benchmark itself against other countries in the region that have chosen to follow this path to a sustainable country and a sustainable world.

Furthermore, BNA has staff contributing to the development of the upcoming National Education Plan 2018-2030, as an integral part of the core policy team, by supplying expertise

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[1] http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/themes/. Accessed May 14, 2018.

in information use and knowledge acquisition. Libraries are usually not an integral part of the formal education system, but this serves as an example that our contribution can extend well beyond an informal role facilitating lifelong learning and after-school activities.

As for sustainability and continuity within our organization, we are addressing that as well: we're currently working on an integrated policy plan to address organizational challenges: staff upgrading, capacity building, installing a 21st century skill- and mindset within our organization, while also addressing potential issues like continuity, knowledge transfer to the "next generation", as a result of an "aging" workforce. Off course, such a capacity building plan also involves media and information literacy, and working on related themes, also at the staff development level.

One way in which we try to contribute to universal access to information is to try to achieve interoperability of "durably" digitized (cultural) heritage information on a national and international level. To do so, we are closely cooperating with the Aruban National Archive (ANA) to develop and implement national standards for digitization, and durable preservation of (digitized and born-digital) information based on international (quality and metadata) standards. By doing this, durable access to digitized information over the next couple of decades will be greatly facilitated, and any future cooperation and resource sharing will be stimulated and will be easier to achieve.

Another way to contribute to open access is by "crowdsourcing". An offshoot of the "Travelling Caribbean Heritage" research project currently underway as a cooperation between Caribbean and European parts of the Dutch Kingdom, the "Wiki Goes Caribbean" project, facilitated by the Wikimedia Foundation and the Dutch UNESCO Memory of the World Committee, is aimed at stimulating the production and/or translation of (Dutch) Caribbean content, in any language and format, through Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons and Wikidata. BNA is part of the initial train-the-trainer sessions currently being held (May 2018) and will be offering its space and expertise for the local follow-up meetings, writing sessions and courses for the general public scheduled to take place from September 2018 onward and/or currently being planned.

Conclusion

Library use and user groups evolve and change, continually. Nowadays, senior citizens stay active more and more, and after retiring, many choose to keep learning, and to keep participating in society through volunteering. The library also caters to their needs, not only by offering a "place to read", but also a place to learn, and to "connect" (in the broadest sense of the word).

Conversely, young learners use technology as an extension of their life. Access to information, to many of them, is something that's just there, nothing out of the ordinary. Access to all kinds of information is a given, and information is published and used, sometimes without thinking twice about possible consequences. Fake news, dubious sources, and re-use of information without the proper appropriation are real issues. Although libraries have perhaps lost the role of being the sole or primary source of aggregated information in a society, conveying the message of the importance of digital literacy and critical information skills, and establishing partnerships with schools, school boards, (local/national) media outlets, and regionally and internationally through ACURIL, *Mediawijzer*, UNESCO, and IFLA to anchor these skills in a future-proof curriculum.

Libraries are inherently designed as sustainable institutions, combining core societal values as literacy, lifelong learning, access to all, building societies and celebrating diversity and culture. A sustainable library policy, with the library not only as a provider, but as a gateway and a guide to information and its efficient use is part of the shared future of libraries and the communities they exist in. Libraries can play a larger role than just "accommodating" or "facilitating". Libraries have the potential to be a leader and/or a crucial partner in building a sustainable and inclusive (information) society, building partnerships that fortify each partner's and each individual's strengths. The road to 2030 (and beyond) is long, but progress can be made quite easily, especially in small (Caribbean) island nations and its communities.